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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
4 December 1985

They come not single spies but in battalions

By SANDY GRADY

WASHINGTON—It has been a strange day here in the Spook Capital of the Western World. Not one spy has tumbled out of the woodwork.

Such silence in Spook City is eerie.

As far as I know, not one foreign agent has been caught today rifling CIA czar Bill Casey's desk. No U.S. bureaucrat has been trapped in Lafayette Park handing over the secrets of Star Wars. The FBI hasn't had one bang-bang car chase in pursuit of a fleeing KGB villain.

Ever since the John Walker case broke in May, this city has seemingly turned into a movie set for a John Le Carré novel. Every week another defector, double agent or spook-for-hire crashes the headlines.

The town's a boiling pot of spookdom. Spies for Israel, China, Ghana and the USSR have been arrested. The supersecret U.S. agencies—CIA, FBI, the National Security Agency, the Defense Department—have all been mugged.

Now, in the wake of the espionage epidemic, we're hearing a lot of self-congratulatory bombast about the wonders of U.S. spy catchers.

Ronald Reagan, a wizard at silver linings, says on radio that there are more spies and "we are looking harder" for them. He brags of new, tougher counterintelligence systems.

Navy Secretary John Lehman, after a spy turned up in his own intelligence unit, says, "It shows we're much more active on counterespionage and we're tightening up the system."

Maybe. But from what an outsider can determine, the U.S. spy-catching has been messy, often bumbling, and shot through with luck.

Face it, the year's prize spy, John Walker, was only nailed because his disgruntled ex-wife had a few drinks and called the FBI to say, "I think my husband's spying for the Russians."

But how was Walker able to peddle classified stuff to the Reds for 30 years, sucking a son, brother and allegedly even a Navy pal into his ring, without detection? The experts are silent.

And what of 1985's two other major catches, ex-CIA officer Eddie Howard and former National Security Agency worker Ronald Pelton? Would either have been tagged if Vitaly Yurchenko, the mysterious, fickle Soviet KGB defector, hadn't turned them in?

How did Howard, despite the Singing Red's tip, get away? How was Pelton able to make trips to Vienna to unload secrets to the Soviets? And Yurchenko, of course, walked out of a Georgetown cafe, leaving the CIA with the bill and a crimson face.

There was a hullabaloo about the corraling of Larry Wu-Tai Chin, a CIA analyst who allegedly fed top secrets to the Chinese. How was Chin supposedly able to operate as a Chinese spook-in-residence for 33 years? Did nobody in the CIA wonder about his trips to Hong Kong, where he reportedly stashed a million bucks?

And while the Reagan administration has pushed for wider use of polygraphs, only one minor spy, a CIA woman clerk who passed trivia to Ghana, is known to have been bagged by a lie detector.

Jay Pollard, who is accused of selling secrets to Israel, was caught because colleagues in Naval Intelligence saw him snooping. How did Pollard, a loudmouth who boasted at cocktail parties of being an Israeli spy, pass the Navy's security checks?

That's not a glorious record, despite FBI Director William Webster's defense that his counterintelligence unit is "outmanned but not outfought."

No doubt Webster's 1,200 agents are overworked—sitting in small rooms monitoring phone calls to Soviet bloc embassies, tailing cars with diplomatic tags, tapping American suspects—matched against the influx of potential spies.

The answer may be more agents, smarter counter-spycraft, fewer Soviet bloc diplomats, fewer Americans holding top-secret badges. The answer is not a McCarthy-style, 1950s witch hunt for Reds or a new Secrets Act that builds a wall around the bureaucracy.

REAGAN WAS RIGHT when he said, "There's no need to fight repression by becoming repressive ourselves."

But hold the applause. On the evidence, the U.S. spy catchers have been lucky bumblers.

In real-life Spook City, U.S.A., there aren't many George Smileys.